



**LONG ISLAND DOG OWNERS GROUP (LI-DOG)
P.O. BOX 1171
HUNTINGTON, NY 11743**



Email: lidog_news@yahoo.com
Website: www.lidog.org

April 24, 2015

Wayne Horsley, Regional Director, Long Island
New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation
P.O. Box 247
Babylon, NY 11702

Dear Regional Director Horsley,

Once again, thank you for meeting with us last June to discuss increasing access to New York State beaches for Long Island dog owners and their dogs. As you know, tens of thousands of families on Long Island own dogs. These families would benefit tremendously, both in terms of their health and well-being as well as that of their dogs, from a change in policy allowing them access to New York State beaches. We look forward to meeting with you again to continue our discussion about addressing the needs of this large and growing constituency.

Last fall, we asked our supporters to email the Office of Parks about their interest in gaining access to beaches. We have had the opportunity to see the issues raised by the Office of Parks in responses sent by Deputy Regional Director George Gorman. We appreciate the considered approach that Mr. Gorman and your staff are taking toward our request and would like to address the concerns raised by the Office of Parks. We have put the concerns articulated by Mr. Gorman in italics. Our responses, which are the result of our experience with dogs in public parks, interviews with community leaders, and additional research, as well as the actions we propose to address these concerns, follow.

1) We [The New York State Office of Parks] are concerned that dogs who utilize the beaches will relieve themselves and we will have urine and fecal matter contaminating the water and sand. Although many dog owners will be responsible and clean up after their pets, unfortunately many will not. This could pose a health risk and we then may be required to close down the beachfront to swimming.

LI-DOG strongly supports regulations that mandate people clean up after their dogs as well as the strict enforcement of those regulations. The majority of dog owners these days know that cleaning up after their dog is a basic responsibility. Our extensive experience with dog parks and on-leash dog walking in public parks is that peer pressure works to ensure the majority of dog owners clean up after their pets. Interviews with Long Island community leaders where dogs are allowed on beaches confirm that the presence of other dog owners and their desire to protect their access to beaches help keep

beaches clean. “We pick up the beach because we don’t want to lose our privileges,” said one East End dog owner. “People really treasure this privilege,” said another.

The reports we’ve seen where water quality was analyzed at beaches frequented by people with dogs found that with few exceptions water quality was good. In cases where pollution was found, storm water runoff, aging sewage systems and leaking septic tanks were identified as the most significant sources of pollution. The likelihood that beaches would have to be closed because of the presence of dogs seems small compared to these other, more significant risks to beachfront swimming. In fact, we are not aware of any beaches on Long Island where dogs are permitted that have been closed because of their presence.

Nevertheless, LI-DOG is addressing concerns about clean up by proposing that access to beaches be provided during the off-season when beaches go largely unused. We would also urge the Office of Parks to consider selecting beaches that are not used for swimming to be designated for use by dog owners and their dogs.

Admittedly, there are people who are not responsible, whether they’re beach-goers or dog owners. The Office of Parks does not close down beaches because some people litter, break bottles, fight, and vandalize public property. Similarly, the majority of responsible dog owners should not be denied access to beaches because a few people might fail to clean up. LI-DOG supports stiff fines for people who break the rules whether it’s vandalizing public property or not picking up after their dogs.

In addition, LI-DOG is prepared to organize as-needed cleanups such as our PUP—Pick Up the Poop—program. Our organization will also work to ensure that the importance of cleaning up after one’s dog and our strong support for the strict enforcement of these rules is communicated to dog owners. We will also work with the Office of Parks to develop signage and flyers and we will use our email list and social media to drive home that message. “It’s all about education,” said one Southold Town official. “Ninety-five percent of dog owners are responsible,” she said.

2) Within Long Island State Park Beaches there are endangered plants and wildlife that are on both Federal and State endangered lists and they cannot be disturbed, and

4) Birds- as you probably know dogs tend to chase birds and other wildlife. These include migratory birds. We are concerned if there will be a negative impact on the bird and other wildlife population.

LI-DOG is asking for access to beaches during the off-season when migratory and endangered birds are generally not present. Dogs, therefore, should present minimal risk to endangered wildlife. The National Park Service provides access to ocean beaches at Fire Island National Seashore, which provides critical habitat for Piping Plovers, to dog owners and their dogs from after Labor Day until mid-March. Migratory birds fly south for the winter by mid-August and do not return until mid-March. Even during the summer, dog owners are allowed to walk their dogs on boardwalks and bayside beaches at Fire Island National Seashore.

On the East End of Long Island where dogs are allowed on beaches during the summer when migratory birds are nesting, 150-ft boundaries around these nests are strictly enforced by Town authorities. LI-DOG fully supports such protocols and enforcement and would underscore the importance of respecting these measures through our communications efforts. The National Park Service and East End towns represent good examples of government authorities that have balanced the needs of wildlife with the recreational needs of local residents who own dogs.

3) *We are also concerned with dogs swimming in the surf and being pulled out into the ocean with a rip current. We do not want to endanger pets.*

Certainly, LI-DOG would not want any risk to dogs in rough surf. Yet, dogs have been happily going to East End town ocean beaches for years. Flags or signs warning of rough surf would be key features at any ocean beach that allowed dogs. We would urge the Office of Parks to also consider designating beaches for dog owner use where rough surf is not a common occurrence. These would include bayside beaches on the South Shore and Long Island Sound beaches on the North Shore.

5) *Interaction with other park visitors who are not dog owners- unfortunately we have had incidents where individuals are frightened by barking dogs as well as individuals that have been bitten by dogs within Long Island State Parks. Especially if dogs are not on leashes.*

While all dog bite incidents are traumatic, the risk of such an incident occurring in a public park or at the beach is extremely small. A New York City study in 2006 found that the percentage of dog bites that occurs in parks--whether the dogs were leashed or unleashed—was under 3%. The majority of such incidents occur on dog owners' properties. Moreover, New York City found that the more access provided to dog owners and their dogs to off-leash and on-leash recreation over the last 20 years, the more these incidents have declined. It is now common knowledge among dog behaviorists, trainers and veterinarians that dogs that get adequate exercise and socialization are more well-adjusted canine members of the community.

As far as people being frightened by dogs, we understand some people do not want to come into contact with dogs. Any on-leash or off-leash access to beaches should be clearly marked and defined. People who do not want to come into contact with dogs can avoid these areas or go to the vast majority of beaches on Long Island that do not allow dogs.

6) *In performing some initial review when dogs are authorized utilizing a park, traditional users who are not dog owners have stopped using that park.*

Actually, academic studies these days indicate that the presence of dog owners and their dogs in public spaces is a socializing influence. That is, their presence increases the frequency of interactions among people. This opportunity for social interaction is particularly important for individuals who may be alone in the world such as senior citizens. "For a lot of single people, dogs are the most significant relationship in their life," noted one dog owner. As anyone who has ever owned dogs and walked them in parks knows, they are a great way to meet new friends and neighbors.

Moreover, for years Parks Dept. officials have told us that the regular presence of dog owners and their dogs in parks is a deterrent to undesirable and even illegal activities. The Town of Huntington recently created an on-leash dog walking program at a town park plagued by illegal activities. Since the program was created, there have been no further serious incidents. The off-leash hours program in New York City parks has also been widely credited with helping make NYC parks safer.

Far from turning people off from using New York State parks and beaches, the presence of dog owners and their dogs would be viewed by many people as welcome additions to the landscape.

In fact, public officials should be doing everything in their power to encourage people to get out and walk with their dogs. While inadequate physical activity and obesity are well-known public health issues, there is considerable evidence that dog ownership is associated with higher levels of physical activity. Instead of closing off vast swaths of public land to dog owners and their dogs, public officials should work to improve public health by incenting people to get out and walk their dogs, for their own health and that of their dogs, by providing access to adequate recreational space.

Again, dog owners represent a very large proportion of the population—49% of American households, according to the American Pet Products Association. It is time for the recreational needs of this large group of people to be balanced with other considerations.

7) Dogs fighting and negatively interacting when they are not on leashes.

Community leaders on the East End of Long Island report that conflicts among dogs are rare, including when dogs are allowed off-leash on beaches. Beaches and parks are neutral territory and it is more likely dogs will be looking for fun and exercise.

8) If we authorize dogs to run freely on beaches, what about other pets? What happens if we have a cat owner that would like their cat to run free?

When LI-DOG first began working on getting dog parks created in Suffolk County, we heard many similar concerns to those raised above, including the concern that cat owners would seek off-leash areas for their pets. To date, we are not aware of any efforts to increase cat access to public parkland, although we welcome diversity! Rather, in 2007, the Suffolk County Legislature unanimously passed legislation directing the Parks Commissioner to create at least five new dog parks. Since then, LI-DOG has worked with elected officials and Parks Dept. officials to get 10 dog parks created in Suffolk and Nassau counties and concerns similar to those raised above have been subsumed by the positive experiences thousands of people and their dogs have had at these facilities.

We understand that providing dog owners and their dogs with access to beaches on Long Island represents a change in long-standing New York State Parks policy. But, much has changed since the policy, which prohibits all access to NYS beaches on Long Island by dog owners and their dogs, went into effect. The current policy is out-of-date and draconian by today's standards. Lack of access to beaches is one of the loudest complaints we hear from Long Island dog owners, especially those who have moved here from other parts of the country. It is difficult to provide a reasonable explanation as to why allowing people with dogs on beaches is a normal, expected activity in other populated, upscale areas of the country, but not on Long Island. It's time for the Office of Parks to work with the dog owner community to update its policies so they do a better job of addressing the needs of this large and growing constituency. Such a change would be welcomed by many families as an acknowledgement by New York State officials that they consider their interests and understand the benefits of dog ownership for individuals and the community at large.

Thank you so much for your attention. Please feel free to reach out to us with any questions on the material we have presented above. We are hopeful that this information has addressed many of your concerns. We will call your office in the next few weeks so that we can continue our discussion about getting more access to New York State parks and beaches for Long Island dog owners and their dogs.

Sincerely,

Ginny Munger Kahn, President

Peggy Heijmen, Vice President

Barbara Buscareno, Founder

Christine Laubis, Vice President